

STAFF REPORT

TO: Planning & Economic Development Committee

DATE: 8/17/10

FROM: Shannon Tuch, Assistant Planning & Development Director

SUBJECT: Encouraging Redevelopment on Merrimon Avenue

Summary

Over the last several months, a variety of topics have been discussed prompting several requests for additional information, background and context. The following provides some background on the Merrimon Avenue Corridor regulatory history.

Background

Merrimon Ave. (US Hwy 25) is a 4-lane, north-south arterial road corridor with an identity crisis. It is the central artery for North Asheville and one of the more prominent and heavily traveled corridors in the region. Generally classified as an "Urban/Neighborhood Corridor"; it connects neighborhoods with each other, with employment centers, with institutional uses, and with other major thoroughfares. It also, however, reflects elements of a "Connecting Corridor", roads that are designed primarily to support the flow of traffic, connecting compact centers of urban development (Downtown Asheville + Woodfin+ Weaverville). The development pattern along the corridor is also reflective of both types of corridors containing a mix of building types offering retail, service, office, and residential uses that serve and are complemented by the adjacent neighborhoods. These uses are contained within a mixed development pattern where portions of the corridor are more highway oriented, while others are more neighborhood oriented.

Contributing to Merrimon's identity issues are the many challenges experienced when travelling on the corridor. The current four lane cross section is unsafe and frustrating for drivers and pedestrians. Vehicles make unpredictable movements into and out of driveways; traffic flow often abruptly comes to a halt when vehicles attempt to turn left; sidewalks are narrow and obstructed by signs and utility poles; driveways are spaced so closely together that there is more curb cut than sidewalk; bicycle lanes are non-existent; transit is infrequent; and there is little along the corridor that provides comfort to the frequent pedestrian user. In short, Merrimon Ave. is a transportation corridor that doesn't work especially well for anyone. As a result, a variety of stakeholders expressed interest in developing a long-range plan for Merrimon Ave., and an attempt was begun in 2005.

Merrimon Ave. Corridor Study

In 2005, a group of North Asheville residents approached City staff about developing a long-range vision for Merrimon Ave. The renewed interest was likely prompted by a number of controversial development projects along the corridor that concerned citizens who feared that there would be an emerging development designed to meet the criteria (size, placement, design, and parking) of chain retailers. For example, some past attempts to guide a more pedestrian friendly development pattern on behalf of the City were ineffective and resulted in several projects that were neither pedestrian-oriented nor vehicle-oriented. Commonly referred to locally at the time as the "Frankenstein's" of Merrimon, in the opinion of many area residents, these projects failed to address critical community needs and the need for a new plan and vision became a high priority.

The volunteer group proposed to meet and develop a list of recommendations for development along Merrimon that would later be shared with City staff with the intent of collaborating on a more refined code amendment to be adopted and implemented as a new Mixed Use Corridor (MXD) zoning district. The MXD zoning would then be applied to the majority of Merrimon Ave. Unfortunately, this process proved flawed since many of the original group members representing business owners on the corridor failed to attend the meetings on a regular basis and later became alarmed at the scope of the recommendations proposed and opposed the new zoning designation after the proposal was recommended for approval at the Planning and Zoning Commission. Seeing the intense opposition, the Council elected not to act on the proposal.

To summarize, the purpose of the MXD zoning was stated as follows:

- (a) *Purpose.* The Mixed Use District (MXD) is established to foster urban-style, mixed-use development that is economically-viable, pedestrian-oriented, visually-attractive and contributing to the place-making character of the city. The Mixed Use District is designed to provide new development and redevelopment opportunities in the form of structures exhibiting an urban form that relate to the street, enhance the streetscape, and offer a wide range of complementary land uses and employment opportunities. The Mixed Use District is intended primarily for use in areas intended for an urban development form and where the design and appearance of the built environment is important to the vitality of the area. Typical application of this district will be in areas with sufficient infrastructure to support this type of development. Enhancing and maintaining the transportation function and capacity of adjacent streets is also a goal of this district. There should be general compatibility with established small area or corridor plan(s) or with the existing or historic development pattern in applying this district and the district may have area-specific requirements in order to meet the goals of these plans.

As the purpose statement indicates, the creation of the Mixed-Use District was to guide and incentivize, through density, more sustainable development in easy to access areas that would meet a variety of community needs. The primary focus of the proposal was to improve pedestrian comfort through some form-based elements that would guide new structures to have a minimum height (generally 2-stories, with exceptions), be oriented to the street, de-emphasize off-street parking by placing it to the side or rear, include window/ door fenestration on the street, and have square footage limitations to help control mass to support a built environment more comfortable at a lower density “urban” scale vs. a “suburban” scale.

Additionally, sidewalk enhancements were included that would widen the walking surface but also provide a “green strip” between the sidewalk and the edge of road that would provide a safer and more pleasant environment for pedestrians. The overall and long range intent behind the MXD zoning was to develop a basic set of corridor development standards that could be applied where appropriate to the major corridors in the city but also provide “Area Specific Development Standards”. Such an approach would customize some of the form-based features so that new construction would blend more appropriately with the unique character of each separate corridor. As an example, the MXD zoning required 10-foot wide sidewalks while the sidewalk cross-section for Merrimon was also 10-feet wide but, consisted of a 4-foot green strip at the back of curb with a 6-foot wide sidewalk behind the green. Similarly, parking was to be placed to the side and rear of all buildings in the MXD zoning but the special standards for Merrimon was to allow a single row of parking in front of buildings to match the existing

development pattern.

Other improvements, such as burying overhead utilities, and other transportation amenities were also recommended but were largely dependent on inter-agency cooperation and funding.

Alternatives to MXD

Since the rejection of the MXD proposal, planning staff has kept the Merrimon Ave. conundrum at the forefront of its collective consciousness and have explored a variety of options. Also, the corridor standards concept continues to have support with residents in the areas of Merrimon Avenue, Tunnel Road East, and Haywood Road in West Asheville. The idea with the most support is to develop an Asheville specific form-based code for urban corridors as an overlay that can be applied to parts of Merrimon and similar heavily travelled transit corridors that also serve as neighborhood centers. As an overlay, the developer or property owner would have the choice of developing under the base zoning, preserving their development rights, but could also choose to take advantage of certain incentives to develop under a higher yield form-based overlay. To develop a form-based code would necessitate the hiring of a consultant who is an expert in the field of form-based coding which is somewhat architectural and graphic oriented. This is advised due to the specialized training needed to communicate development standards graphically, and would require financial resources not currently available. Even with a consultant, staff resources would also be required to be dedicated to this process as well.

While there are many advantages to considering a form-based code, there are a variety of other options that could also be considered including the current Sustainability Amendment which accomplishes some of the same goals.